

Panhandle Health District

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Another Chance to End the Addiction

By Cynthia Taggart
Panhandle Health District

The day Mary Petty, R.N., quit smoking will stay with her forever. Cigarettes were on her mind, but they didn't tease her.

"I was blown away," the Panhandle Health District epidemiologist said. "Every time I quit before, smoking was all I could think about all day long. It's a terrible addiction."

Petty smoked for 41 years. She tried to quit at least seven times. One time, she lasted four months without a cigarette. But the addiction always won. This time, she believes, is different.

Petty used Chantix, a new smoking cessation aid from Pfizer Pharmaceuticals. The results of clinical trials on Chantix intrigued her, although she admits she was skeptical of the optimistic numbers. She's stayed smoke-free for three months so far and isn't struggling as she has in the past.

"Every time I quit before it was a fight every day," she said. "This is not that way. When I think about smoking now, I think, 'Why do I want to do that?'"

Helping smokers quit the habit is one of Bonnie Held's missions. Held is a senior health education specialist at Panhandle Health District. Last year, she taught smoking cessation classes to 480 teens and 55 adults sponsored by the State of Idaho Millennium Fund.

The American Lung Association gives Idaho a B-minus for its laws to keep public spaces smoke-free and limit children's access to tobacco. Still, Lung Association statistics show that tobacco kills 14 people a day in Idaho.

"Nicotine is the most addictive drug out there," Held said. "There are 4,000 chemicals in tobacco. We've got to get people off tobacco."

Idaho combats tobacco addiction with the Millennium Fund, a trust fund for the state's share of millions of dollars from a nationwide tobacco settlement. Idaho has pledged that money, which it will receive until 2025, to tobacco cessation and prevention programs, substance abuse programs and treatment for diseases related to tobacco use or substance abuse.

PHD received \$66,500 from the Millennium Fund in this fiscal year, July 1, 2006 to June 30, 2007. That money enables the Health District to offer adult and teen tobacco cessation classes. Held will organize a four-week class for any group of five people or more.

She teaches in a state-of-the-art classroom at the Health District headquarters in Hayden, but she'll also take her classes to businesses, homes, community centers or wherever a group decides is convenient.

The classes work on breaking the chain of addiction. Held teaches about nicotine triggers and offers practical guidance to fight the urge to use tobacco: try to put off smoking or chewing for at least five minutes. Each time, try to put it off just a little longer. Or, drinking lots of water and fruit juices help fight off cravings. Or, take 10 slow deep breaths. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Relax and close your eyes.

She added information about Chantix to her smoking cessation toolbox after the FDA approved it last May. Chantix requires a doctor's prescription, so Held suggests people in her classes talk to their physicians about it.

Panhandle Health District also teaches smoking cessation classes for teens and trains high school students to promote a tobacco-free lifestyle with peers and younger students.

According to the American Lung Association, 32,000 Idaho teens eventually will die from smoking unless smoking rates decline. Teens Against Tobacco Use (TATU), a program PHD health education specialist Brittany Baeumel facilitates, trains students to understand and identify the positive aspects of being tobacco free. High school mentors inform younger students that the majority of teens and adults don't smoke. They show how tobacco advertising and promotions deceive youth.

Fourth-grade students who heard presentations last fall from the TATU mentors wrote their reactions as guidance for the program. Many showed disgust for tobacco and pledged they would never use it.

Held cherishes those reactions. The more kids the health district can prevent from starting tobacco use eventually will mean fewer adults the health district will have to help quit an ugly and destructive habit.

For more information on smoking cessation for teens and adults, call Held at 415-5142.